

## THAWING THE CHILLY CLIMATE: Two Decades of Women Artists at Douglass College

BY FERRIS OLIN

Ms. Olin is Executive Officer of the Institute for Research on Women  
and the Laurie New Jersey Chair in Women's Studies at Douglass College,  
Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey

This is an appropriate time to reflect on the importance of the Mary H. Dana Women Artists Series for Douglass College and the university community. The 20th anniversary of the Women Artists Series coincides with two other celebrations on campus during the coming academic year—Douglass College will mark the 75th anniversary of its founding and Rutgers College will host a series of events in honor of its 20th year of coeducation.

It is also a particularly relevant time for me to reflect on my experiences at the University—as a graduate of Douglass and the Rutgers Graduate School; and since 1976, as a member of the Rutgers faculty—especially as they mirror the rationale, development, and success of the Mary H. Dana Women Artists Series. These personal reminiscences acknowledge the political atmosphere on campus and attest to what Bernice Sandler, former Executive Director of The Project on the Status and Education of Women of the Association of American Colleges, has named “the chilly climate” on campus for women. I felt it, as well, as especially chilly for women in the visual arts.

In the late 1960s, the mood at Douglass College was fairly typical of that found on any U.S. college campus. Students and faculty were caught up in the debate over our government's involvement in Vietnam, civil rights issues, and the second feminist wave. I remember quite vividly students capturing Old Queens, shutting down the University and eventually causing final exams to be disrupted. I remember going to a classroom, only to move to a new location because of the latest bomb threat to the building. (These reached epidemic proportions around the time of hourlies.) But most of all, I remember the debates at Douglass about co-education in response to the 1969 Rutgers College decision to admit women.

Should Douglass remain a single-sex institution or join the national trend toward co-education? Faculty, administration and students held many discussions on the pros and cons of sex-segregated education. Germaine Greer visited Douglass and discussed her soon-to-be published dissertation, *The Female Eunuch*, and women's issues. Rumors abounded that Douglass was about to become the radical feminist college on the East Coast. Old-garde faculty members formed a coalition with more "radical" professors to maintain the status quo; while the so-called "liberal" faction supported co-education and thereby were branded extremely conservative. In April 1970, a faculty committee recommended that the college's mission to educate women be maintained. The vote in support of that recommendation was 2 to 1 in favor. Douglass College remained the largest women's college in the United States. Less than one year later the college was in the national forefront in developing and teaching women's studies courses. This was the same year that saw the inauguration of the Women Artists Series.

As an Art History major at Douglass I recognized early on in my studies that women were absent from the history of art as it was taught and from the art faculty, as well. During my undergraduate days, there were no female professors of studio art at Douglass, a fact that didn't change until the 1975-76 academic year, when the Douglass Art Department finally hired a woman to teach art full-time. Only two of my Douglass art history courses were taught by women—neither of whom were regular full-time members of the faculty. In not one art history course was the work of women artists discussed; though women's roles were mentioned—as queens, collectors, and/or as artists models.<sup>1</sup> Five years after graduating from Douglass I received a Masters in Art History. Graduate course content remained virtually the same as it was when I was an undergraduate—women artists were invisible and didn't seem to exist. In fact, at my entrance interview I was asked why I wished to return to graduate school. I mentioned an interest in the roles women play in the visual arts and my desire to research the work of women artists. The faculty member who interviewed me told me that studying women artists was just a fad, soon to become passe. His prediction turned out to be wrong! The longevity of the Dana Women Artists Series attests to his false prophesy.

Initially, the Women Artists Series was created to provide alternative exhibition space for metropolitan-area artists; to provide role models for students at Douglass; and to expand library services to our university community. These objectives have been met: for the current crop of Douglass art and art history majors, Rutgers MFA candidates, and graduate

students in the Art History Program, the majority of whom are women, can find a large cadre of women professors who also are feminists. In fact, in a recent Institute for Research on Women survey of Rutgers faculty, more than 200 individuals self-identified as doing research on women and gender issues.

In reviewing catalogs for the past 20 years I note with awe the number of artists with national and international reputations who have shown at the Douglass Library, for example: Nancy Azara, who showed in 1971–72 and Miriam Schapiro, who exhibited in the 1974–75 season joined with other women artists in 1976 to found the New York Feminist Art Institute—a feminist art school, which has only just closed its doors; Howardena Pindell whose work was on display in 1972, also worked as a curator at the Museum of Modern Art and more recently has documented the lack of support for and discrimination against minority artists in the arts community; Louise Bourgeois, whose solo show was here in 1974–75, did not have her first retrospective until 1982, when the Museum of Modern Art honored her; and environmental artist Athena Tacha came to campus with her exhibition in 1976–77 and later received a commission for public sculpture at a New Jersey State governmental building.

In addition to visibility for the artists and student accessibility to original works of art by women artists, the series also created several formats of documentation useful to scholars. Women Artists Series catalogs provide an excellent basis to reexamine the history of the women's art movement during the second feminist wave. Among important catalog authors can be found a who's who of contemporary art historians and art critics—Linda Nochlin, Joan Marter, Lucy Lippard, and Lawrence Alloway, to name a few. Each raised important questions about scholarship and the visual arts as exemplified in the artists' works.

Equally important for documentation was the early decision to invite artists to campus to discuss their work. These presentations became the basis of an archive of videotapes. Again, students had immediate access to practicing women artists, when no female art faculty were available as role models. Researchers now have the benefit of this repository of interviews. Some of the artists, feminist scholars, and art critics participated in campus programs dealing with the critical debates of the times—defining female imagery and women's art, women artists' identities, the creative process and equality in the arts.

Additionally, the series also served as an impetus to identify contemporary New Jersey women artists. Lynn Miller, the first coordinator of the

series, established a slide registry of living New Jersey women artists. In the first year, more than 600 slides were received and cataloged. Later, several editions of a directory of the slide registry were published and distributed .

The Slide Registry of New Jersey Women Artists and the corresponding group shows fueled my own interest in New Jersey women artists. I spent much of the 1970s searching out and rediscovering “lost” New Jersey women—in art, history and community life. My own research lead to a number of by-products (many collaborative)—slide lectures on New Jersey women artists; an NEH-funded/Radcliffe College project which provided women’s studies programming and coordinated exhibitions centered at a local public library; an exhibition and symposia series celebrating 300 years of women in Middlesex County and New Jersey under the sponsorship of the Middlesex County Cultural and Heritage Commission; and most recently, a biographical reference volume on representative and extraordinary New Jersey women, an accompanying traveling exhibition, poster series, and archives produced by the Women’s Project of New Jersey, Inc.

The 1986–87 season brought a first. With the support of a Humanities Grant from the New Jersey Department of Higher Education, the college, library, and Visual Arts Department organized a two-semester course which tied the series to curricular concerns. (The Art History Department had previously focused a few courses on the series.) Judith Brodsky (Visual Arts), Hildreth York (Museum Studies Program), Louise Duus (American Studies Program and Associate Dean of Douglass), and I revised the content of a tradition visual arts course to incorporate the new scholarship on race, gender, ethnicity and age. The project, known as “Models of Persistence,” engaged more than 40 undergraduate and graduate students who learned about 20th-century art history through the life stories of two artists—Minna Citron, who turned 90 during the course, and Bernarda Bryson Shahn, who is in her eighties. The students curated solo exhibitions of their works for the Women Artists Series and produced exhibition catalogs; did original research and oral histories of the artists leading to two television quality videotapes; and organized a one-day conference for art educators where they presented their findings. This project was particularly effective in making students aware of modern art history and the realities of art-making. As one student wrote in her course evaluation, “. . . I found oral history research to be very rewarding. Meeting an elderly woman artist and learning of her life and career is interesting and inspiring.”

Individual exhibitions within the series has elicited a variety of responses from students, staff and library patrons. Kitty Wales’ sculptures of pigs

provided humorous fodder for the library staff. Queries included: "Is this a Cook College exhibit? What's the point?" While Bibi Lencek's work stirred controversy. Her frontal nudes of a heterosexual couple making love drew criticism from some students in the fall of 1975. Several students complained that the library was an inappropriate site to hang nudes, imposing them on anyone who entered the building and infringing on the rights of the individual. In response to this and other complaints, the series organized a forum for discussing the art work and the issues it raised. Fifteen years later, issues of personal rights, definitions of obscenity and pornography and appropriateness of certain art objects in publicly-funded places are still being questioned, i.e the recent closing of the Cincinnati Museum of Art exhibition of Robert Maplethorpe photographs.

The Dana Women Artists Series has made major contributions to campus life at Douglass. It has introduced original art to students, faculty, staff and the larger public in a setting which normally would be seen only as a repository for books. It has made art accessible to a public which might otherwise not visit a museum or gallery. It has served as a catalyst for critical thinking about art, art making, and its content. It has shown art to be entertaining, whimsical, serious, controversial and intellectual.

The series has also had a national impact. Lawrence Alloway noted in the introduction to Year 6 catalog that the Women Artists Series predates the founding of many women's cooperative art galleries. These developed to provide alternative exhibition space to artists denied visibility by the mainstream art community. The series was and remains innovative. In 1986, the series received national recognition from the Women's Caucus for Art for its achievements—the first and only time that this national organization gave its award to an institution.

Throughout these two decades, the Mary H. Dana Women Artists Series has been in the forefront of the women's art movement and issues related to women in the arts; making these issues visible to the college community. Although a chilly climate for women in the arts existed in the late 1960s and into the 1970s and although women artists continue to make advancements, we need to maintain our vigilance to ensure that the thaw continues apace. The original rationale for series unfortunately is equally justified in 1992. Recent findings indicate that the visibility of women artists, although on an upswing in the 1970s and early 1980s, had declined by 1985.<sup>2</sup>

I am privileged to have participated in the cultural life of Douglass College before and after the rise of the contemporary women's movement. Douglass College is one of the leading places to be pursuing studies and

research on cutting edge topics in women's studies. The constellation of nationally-known programs—the Institute for Research on Women, Center for the American Woman and Politics, Center for Women's Global Leadership, Blanche, Edith and Irving Laurie New Jersey Chair in Women's Studies at Douglass, Women's Studies Program of FAS–New Brunswick, Douglass Project for Rutgers Women in Math, Science and Engineering, Douglass Advisory Services for Women, and the newly launched Institute for Women's Leadership—makes for an active women's community. The Mary H. Dana Women Artists Series is an integral part of this stimulating environment.

#### End Notes

<sup>1</sup> The first course on women in the arts was offered at Douglass College in 1974–75. One year later, more than a dozen artists, art historians and librarians met at the Douglass Library to found the New Jersey Chapter of the Women's Caucus for Art. Judith Brodsky, a New Jersey artist and then President of this national organization, convened the meeting. (She later joined the Rutgers faculty and currently directs the Rutgers Center for Innovative Printmaking.)

<sup>2</sup> See Ferris Olin and Cathy Brawer, "Career Markers," in *Making Their Mark: Women Artists Move into the Mainstream, 1970–1985* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1989), p.207. Findings indicate that the percentage of solo exhibitions by women artists at selected galleries in major cities declined after 1983. This research appears in a monograph which accompanied an exhibition of work by contemporary women artists. It is interesting to note that at least 10 of the artists included in this traveling show had previously held solo exhibitions in the Dana Women Artists Series.